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A STUDY OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND DRAMATIC REASONABLENESS OF THE ALCESTIS OF EURIPIDES.

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W. FARRELL DYDE.

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#1

PREFACE.

The Alcestis is a play which has been a long and constant source of contention among critics and yet has attained a degree of popularity, whether deservedly or not, second to no other of Euripides' dramas. The purpose of this essay is to set before the reader the main events in the history of this conflicting criticism, and also to extract from it and from the drama itself some positive conclusions which will harmonize with the widely accepted belief that Euripides is a writer of genuine dramatic talent.

The plan of this thesis calls for certain apologies at the outset. Some treatment of the Alcestis myth ought to have been included, but the lack of reference material baffled the writer in his search. Further, it might have been expected that a consideration of the religious ideas of the play would be included; but this thesis deals primarily with dramatic values and that field of investigation has been quite broad enough to absorb all the writer's attention.

For purposes of illustration and quotation, Mr. Way's thoughtful and poetic translation [1] has been used

1. Euripides in English Verse, Vol.I, MacMillan and Co.

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throughout. To him most special thanks are due; to others indebtedness has been acknowledged in the course of the essay.

THE ALCESTIS.

The plot of the Alcestis is briefly as follows:--

A Prologue, in which Apollo and Death clash in argument: Apollo appealing for Alcestis' life, Death refusing the appeal.

Interlude, occupied by a Choric song.

Act I, Scene 1.

A handmaid enters who tells the chorus of Alvestis' state and her preparations for Death. She has expressed a wish to look once more upon the sun.

Interlude -- Choric song --

Act II, Scene 2.

Alcestis, Admetus and children (Alcestis is borne on her couch.). Alcestis feels death coming near her. She asks Admetus never to wed again, and he swears to honor her request, receiving from her hand the little children on these conditions. Alcestis dies. Her little son, Eumelus, throws himself sobbing on his mother's body. Admetus orders funeral preparations.

Interlude -- Choric song --

Act II, Scene 1.

Heracles enters, tells the chorus of his errand. Admetus comes out in mourning attire. He deceives Heracles as to the cause of his mourning, and gives him into the charge of a servant to be looked after in guest-chambers apart. (Exit Heracles). Admetus replies to an objection of the chorus that he has not shown true hospitality.

Interlude -- Choric song --

Act II, Scene 2.

Admetus and Pheres (his father).

Pheres comes to bring gifts to the dead queen. A quarrel between father and son ensues accompanied by soothing interjections from the chorus (Exit Pheres, after him the chorus and Admetus in funeral procession).

Act III, Scene 1.

Servant, Heracles.

The servant complains of Heracles who has been getting drunk in the guest apartments and behaving otherwise disgracefully. (Enter Heracles). Heracles delivers the servant a maudlin lecture. The servant reveals the truth concerning the death of Alcestis. Heracles is sobered and sets forth to rescue the queen from Death.

Act III, Scene 2.

Admetus and Chorus.

Admetus returns from the burial in great distress.

Interlude -- Choric song --

Act III, Scene 3.

Heralces and veiled figure.

Heracles reproaches Admetus for the deception practiced on him in hiding Alcestis' death. He asks him to keep the veiled slave until his return, explaining that he has just won her in an athletic contest. Admetus reluctantly takes the slave girl in charge. Heracles unveils the figure. Admetus receives his wife with joy. Heracles explains that she will be without speech for three days, at the end of which time she will be unconsecrated to the nether gods.

Short choral song (Exeunt omnes).

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Although the Alcestis is the earliest play of Euripides that has survived, it is not to be supposed that it is either immature or unfinished. The drame was produced in the year 438 B.C. when Euripides was about forty-two years of age, and we know that he had already won a first prize in the tragic festival.

As the inquirer sits down to a study of the Alcestis, what help does he derive from criticism and scholarship? Naturally he wants to know to what branch of the drama he shall assign the production which he is about to read. If he turns to the authorities on the subject, he will find a very perplexing difference of opinion. Paul Decharme says,[1] "~~That~~ "The fact of Heracles' intoxication is not in itself sufficient to warrant us in refusing to consider this play a pure tragedy;" and elsewhere,[2] "that part of the Alcestis which resembles comedy, or more accurately speaking, the satyr-drama, is merely the drunken scene in which Heracles appears." One would conclude that Decharme saw no objection to calling the Alcestis a tragedy judging from internal evidence. Further, to show the tangled state of criticism on the subject, even a school edition,[3] which at least ought to be simple and straightforward, contains unusual anomalies. The inference from the following quotations is that the Editor does not know what to call the drama. He says, "Its plot turns upon the subjugation of Thanatos or Death, a most injurious monster, who excites terror from the first scene onwards until he is forced to surrender his victim."[4] This he regards as a satyric

1. Euripides and the Spirit of his dramas, page 248.
2. Id., page 258.
3. Euripides, Alcestis, with Notes and Introduction by C.S.Jerram.
4. Introduction, page 10.

element, although the value of his statement is qualified by our knowledge of the fact that Death does not appear upon the stage except during the prologue and certainly does not exert any noticeable influence upon the body of the play. In remarking on the banquet scene he speaks of the "Jovial satyr-like side of Heracles' character"[1], and again, "The banquet in which he plays so boisterous a part would have been out of place in a pure tragedy, but it is quite in keeping with the requirements of a piece such as we believe the Alcestis to be".[2] Again from the same author, "In the main situations it is a tragedy of the most pathetic kind."[3] Also, "The whole plot is managed so as to call forth the softer emotions and is, as Hartung describes it, 'Idyllic' rather than 'tragic'."[4] In fine the Alcestis is too satyric for tragedy and too tragic for satyr-drama, and the student closes Mr. Jerram's introduction in despair. Mr. Haigh in his book on the Tragic Drama of the Greeks, calls the Alcestis a "Tragi-comedy".[5] It has even been suggested [6] to form a fourth division of the drama called "pathetic" in order to cover the peculiarities of the

1. Introduction, page 10; 2. Intro. Page 17; 3. Intro. Page 10
4. Intro. Page 11; 5. Page 223.
6. Wilken, dissertation "De Alcestide Euripedea" (1868).

Alcestis. It has not taken long to arrive at the first obstacle: there is no unanimity on the classification of the play.

With some misgivings, then, the student attacks the body of the drama, and here again he is confronted by a labyrinth of variation and disagreement among the editors, critics and translators. The following paragraphs synopsize briefly diverse theories of the play advanced by four writers -- Wieland,[1] Browning,[2] Mr. A. S. Way[3] and Mr. Verrall,[4] of whom Wieland and Browning already occupy niches in the hall of poets, while Mr. Way and Mr. Verrall are in the front rank of modern scholarship. Their ideas on the Alcestis are the product of long and careful study (in the case of Browning's "Balaustion's Adventure" the treatment is elaborate) and so their work deserves careful attention.

Mr. Way gives a widely accepted and homogeneous interpretation. In his view Admetus is a noble hero in every respect; Alcestis is a charming woman who dutifully sacrifices herself for her husband; Heracles is a splendid animal, instrument of the gods, kind, brave, impulsive; the resurrection of Alcestis is a reward to Admetus the good king and the "God-reverer" and a just

1. "Alceste". 2. "Balaustion's Adventure".
3. Appendix "A" to "Euripides in English Verse."
4. "Euripides the Rationalist".

reversal of Alcestis' sad fate.

That does not satisfy Browning; this is his interpretation: Admetus is a coward; an undutiful son; Alcestis a noble, self-sacrificing woman; Heracles a hero, a benefactor of mankind, a "world-weary god", a noble figure. Admetus undergoes a change of heart and then is worthy to have his wife restored to him.

Mr. Verrall has a different interpretation: Admetus is a coward, an undutiful son, a faulty host, a selfish, self-centred, sentimental fool. Alcestis is a noble wife; Heracles is a roistering adventurer with his heart in the right place; the resurrection is a farce.

Wieland in his "Alceste" presents still another view. His arrangement is chiefly interesting for what he leaves out (as shall be hereafter noticed in detail). The pervading temper of the play is modern and sentimental. Admetus is a loving husband, anxious to die for his wife, but anticipated by her still greater anxiety to die for him. Heracles is also prepared to die in the general pursuit of "virtue" of which the rescue of Alcestis from the underworld is a specific example.

An examination of the theories which have been briefly synopsized will throw into greater relief the points under dispute; and they will be found neither few nor simple. Mr. Way goes right to the heart of the matter, and clearly and logically gives us his view

on (1) the character of Admetus and (2) the tragic situation.

With regard to Mr. Way's discussion of the character of Admetus, his contention is that in modern times Admetus has been misunderstood to his detriment, and he makes it his task to exonerate him. He says that we bring to the estimate of the character of Admetus "judgments based on instincts inherited from our Teutonic forefathers" and that therefore we misunderstand the play. These Teutonic instincts, he says, lead us into the following errors: (1) We sympathize with the wife who offered herself a loving sacrifice, and condemn the selfish cowardice of the husband who accepted it. (2) We feel that the father's scorn and bitter reproaches are richly merited. (3) The sorrow of Admetus seems to us hypocritical and his lamentations hollow. Mr. Way corrects these errors by laying down the principle:- that the modern view is "diametrically opposed to that of the Athenian audience". This opposition, Mr. Way continues, owes its being to two influences principally -- "our ideas which took form in the days of mediaeval chivalry" and the "teachings of Christianity".

In combatting the three errors just stated

into which our modernity of view leads us he gives the Greek view (and, of course his own) as follows: ~~(1)~~ that Admetus was a "noble character"because he displayed "the highest source of virtue", namely hospitality; that hospitality signified to the Greeks all that the word means with us, and further what we call diplomacy; and that a man like Admetus held in Pherae much the same position as Sir Edward Grey now occupies in England. "He gained for his city allies and for her people friends and protectors in foreign lands, and that in days when without such not only was travel perilous but even commerce was difficult and precarious."

Mr. Way is doubtless right in drawing a distinction between the ideas of hospitality now and then. But surely the basis of the sentiment remains the same and in reply to his view it may be said that a strong regard for hospitality is not foreign to the modern mind, and that even in the play under discussion, Admetus' hospitality is not above criticism.[1] Literature both of all kinds and all countries is full of references to the joy of the host and the respect due to the guest and stranger. The early Hebrew felt it, for we read in the Talmud -- "hospitality is an expression of divine worship". An Arab proverb runs --

1. This point is due to Mr. Verrall,"Euripides the Rationalist" Page 30.

"When the stranger saith 'Alas' the heart of Allah is wounded". Ζεὺς Ξένιος is no stranger to Arabia. And in Shakespeare's Macbeth in the soliloquy which begins "If 'twere done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly," we find the words

"Then as his host
Who should against his murderer shut the door
Not bear the knife myself".

A more modern expression still is found in Emerson, - "The ornament of a house is the friends who frequent it". These quotations show that neither the modern sentiment nor the sentiment of any time regarding hospitality is essentially different from that of Athens. Any difference between the modern and the ancient Greek view is one of degree or relative importance, and such a difference is not marked enough to cause the views of the Greek and Modern about Admetus to be "diametrically opposed."

In the next place it should be pointed out that from the mouths of two characters within the play itself there are distinct criticisms of Admetus' hospitality in the specific case of his reception of Heracles. When the latter is deceived by Admetus as to the cause of the mourning preparations and is persuaded to enter the palace the chorus are sharply critical.

"What dost thou? - such affliction at the door,
"And guests for thee, Admetus? Art thou mad?" [1]

And again --

"Why hide then the dread Presence in the house,
"When came a friend? -- Thyself hast named him friend."[2]

Heracles himself on his appearance with the veiled figure of the rescued Alcestis addresses Admetus thus --

"I came 'mid thine affliction.
"Fair claim was mine to rank amidst thy friends." [3]

If Heracles could have quoted Emerson, he doubtless would have said -- "Let not the emphasis of hospitality be in bed and board, but let truth, love, honor and courtesy flow in all thy deeds".

It is quite true that there are other passages in the play referring to Admetus' proverbial hospitality, but the criticism of Heracles and the chorus is too strong to be passed over, and again Mr. Way's assertion suffers.

Mr. Way's second point with regard to Admetus' character is that in the Greek view, Admetus was right in respect of the "motif and incidents of the play".

1. Lines 551 -- 2.
2. Lines 561 -- 2.
3. Lines 1010 -- 1.

Or in other words, that Admetus was justified in accepting Alcestis as his substitute, and also in the altercation with his father. He was right, Mr. Way asserts, in accepting Alcestis as his substitute on two main grounds: (1) The privilege granted Admetus of finding a substitute was due to the efforts of Apollo, and it would have been impiety to refuse. (2) That the less valuable life should be sacrificed to the more valuable -- Alcestis being naturally the less valuable as proved by a quotation from the Iphigenéia in Aulis,[1] that "the life of one man was better than that of ten thousand women".

Both these points are open to dispute. If there is one thing certain about Euripides, it is that his religious ideas were not orthodox. The companion of Socrates and the Sophists and the man who wrote the Ion cannot be bound by traditional treatment of the gods. Was it necessary, then, for Euripides to have only one mind with regard to Apollo's offer of safety by substitution? It is much more probable that he was ready to discuss the propriety of Apollo's intercession and criticize Admetus for accepting it. If it could be laid down as an axiom that Euripides accepted the gods as types of virtue, then it would follow that

1. Line 1394.

Admetus could not well refuse the gods' offer. But Apollo is not one of his favorites. The seducer of Creusa is handled in the Ion in very plain terms, and the divinity of Apollo does not transform the seduction into a virtuous act. Likewise in the Alcestis the act of the god and the man is to be treated on its merits, and the final judgment must be made on the morals of the fact, not on the divinity of one of the parties to it. These remarks apply to the author not necessarily to the audience. Let it be noted, by the way, that the Alcestis and its companion plays did not win the first prize.[1] The spectators perhaps were at a loss to understand how Admetus could be at one and the same time the favored of Apollo and the selfish husband, unless of course some criticism were being levelled at Apollo as to the choice of his favorites. At any rate, the doubts of the uprightness of Admetus' acceptance of the god's boon cannot be put down as a modern accretion. Further, in saying that to the Greeks the life of a man was worth that of ten thousand women, Mr. Way would have us suppose that our sympathy with Alcestis and condemnation of Admetus spring from "ideas which took form in the days of mediaeval chivalry"; that we cannot judge of the relative value

1. Second Argument, Codex Vaticanus:-

of a man and a woman as the Greeks did. To them the sacrifice of a woman for a man was proper on general grounds; to us it is not. But if Euripides had wished to rest his case on the value of Admetus' life, he ought to have said so in the body of the play and he does not. And it is not possible to think that the creator of Iphigenia, Phaedra, Laodameia, Alcestis, Polyxena and Medea sets a slight estimate on the power of woman. Was it not the face of Helen, a mere woman, "that launched a thousand ships"? And Iphigenia herself who speaks the line referred to -- that the life of a man is worth that of ten thousand women -- accomplishes by her deed of sacrifice more than the whole Greek army could do. Mr. Way has perhaps drawn his conclusion from the negligible value of the average Athenian wife. But there were more women than wives in Athens and Aspasia held in her hand not a small part of the destinies of the Athenian empire.

Again, in direct contradiction to Mr. Way's view, Admetus certainly was not right in the "altercation scene". Mr. Way says, "To the Greeks of that time, the proper victim should have been the King's old father or mother". Accordingly, Admetus, we are to suppose, was righteously pointing out to his father a neglected duty. "Of course," Mr. Way would say,

"we moderns cannot understand Admetus' actions because we are biased by long years of reverence for the Fifth Commandment." However, saying that Admetus was wrong does not mean that his father was right: they were both wrong -- κακὸν ὢν κακοῦ κόραικος someone might say---. The following quotations are agreed in their verdict that Admetus was not justified, and what is more, they are from a Greek point of view. Professor Gilbert Murray discussing the feeling of αἰδώς in his book on the Rise of the Greek Epic writes in this way:[1] "There are five deadly sins, says Hesiod in the 'Erga', of which you cannot say that one is worse than another. They are all beyond the pale.[2] 'It is all one thing -- the man who doeth evil to a suppliant and a stranger; the man who goeth into his brother's bed; the man who in heartlessness sins against orphan children; the man who reviles his father on the bitter threshold of age, laying hold of him with hurting words: with that man Zeus himself is wroth.'"

Aristophanes is the next authority and it is safe to regard him as expressing the everyday idea of morality for the Athens of his time. The just argument (ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣ ΛΟΓΟΣ), in the Clouds speaks thus -- μηδ' ἀντειπεῖν τῷ πατρὶ μηδέν, μηδ' Ἰαπετὸν καλέσαντα μνησικακῆσαι τὴν ἡλικίαν ἐξ ἧς ἐνεοττοτροφήθης

1. Page 108. 2. Erga, 327, ff.

"You must not answer back to your father and you must not call him the 'old man' to spite him for his years spent in bringing you up since you were hatched." [1]

The next quotation is the most striking since it comes from the lips of Admetus himself. It is spoken when only he and the chorus are on the stage and holds the same position as a soliloquy in Shakespearian drama which gives the real feeling of the character who is speaking. Condemning himself he says,

"And if a foe I have, then shall he scoff:
"'Lo there who basely liveth -- dareth not die,
"'But whom he wedded gave, a coward's ransom,
"'And 'scaped from Hades. Count ye him a man?
"'He hates his parents, though himself was loth
"'To die!'" [2]

The reason for the bitter tirade against his father was that he had refused to die in his stead and in these lines he shows his realization of his own unfilial cowardice on that occasion. This with the other two quotations surely leaves no room for doubt that Admetus' violent attack upon his father is not to be justified from any point of view. It is open then to serious doubt that Mr. Way has established Admetus as

1.- Lines 998 - 9. 2. - Lines 954 - 959.

a noble hero or has proved that he was right in respect of the "motif and incidents of the play".

The last point to note in Mr. Way's treatment is his view of the tragic situation. He says that the "especial pathos of the situation to the audience lay in this, that the sacrifice of a young and happy woman was forced upon her by the cowardly selfishness, not of her husband, but of a miserable old man".

Such a view makes Admetus a lay figure as far as the tragic situation is concerned and if Euripides is to be accused of such a dramatic blunder as to leave the principal figure in his tragedy unconnected with its pathos, he becomes a very inferior ~~figure~~ artist, - a statement Mr. Way would be the first to resent.

Our main quarrel with Mr. Way is against his standard of criticism, namely, "that it is certain that the modern view is diametrically opposed to that of the Athenian audience". This standard proves to be as follows: (1) "To the Greeks, Admetus was a noble character"; To us he is a villain. (2) To the Greeks he was right in accepting his wife's sacrifice and reviling his father; to us he is wrong on these two points. (3) To the Greeks he reaped the reward

of a just man; to us his reward was not consistent with his character. If moderns cannot understand the Alcestis because their view of its main issues is diametrically opposed to that of the ancients, then Alcestis is a poor play and Euripides is, so far, a poor poet and a poor playwright. For any play based on feelings that change with changing centuries is bound to perish because it cannot be understood. The point is that great work must be universal and not local in its appeal. Some poets seize on things that are incidental and wresting them from their proper place force them into a central and important position and try to give them an exaltation which they have no right to attain. Mr. Way has ascribed this fault to Euripides looking at him as if he were a Greek and not a human being.

If a painter is noted for his ability to imitate the folds of a satin gown or the soft lace about the throat and not the human spirit behind them, he is not an artist. We demand from the artist a picture which is an interpretation of the man or woman, the life, the soul, the meaning of the thing, and not a perfection of technique expended on its outward habiliments. Yet trivial things may be treated of greatly, for the artist may adorn

the vain butterfly with the embellishments she loves. But look at Mona Lisa then turn away and one cannot tell what clothes she wears. It is not the picture of an Italian lady, but of a woman calmly watching with her slight smile and folded hands the little works of humanity. Admetus did not perish with Greece; we have him with us yet in the selfish man, the sensitive man, the man who will lash his father to hide his own littleness, the man who would be good and would seem greater than he is and at the same time condemns himself for what he is.

Ben Johnson and Shakespeare were contemporary. The interest in Ben Johnson is today largely antiquarian, but Shakespeare does not need a dictionary of antiquities to be read and loved, his appeal is universal and eternal: so with Euripides. But more on this subject after Wieland's Alceste has been discussed.

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Wieland, as has been said, is chiefly interesting for the points in which he has departed from the plot laid down by Euripides. It will be found that he agrees with Mr. Way as to the incidents which need attention or explanation. Mr. Way,

as we have seen, explains these points as Greek idiosyncrasies; Wieland re-writes the drama from a modern point of view, and either changes them or leaves them out. His first notable departure is that Alcestis devotes herself to death as her husband's substitute without his knowledge. It is evident from the following lines of the prologue that in Euripides' version Admetus solicited his substitute:

"To all he went - all near and dear - and asked,
"Grey sire, the mother that had given him life;
"But, save his wife found none that would consent
"For him to die and never more see light." [1]

Wieland is also tinged with those "ideas that took form in the days of mediaeval chivalry". He felt that it was a cowardly thing for Admetus to have asked his wife to take his place and so he changed it.

As the decision to die takes definite shape in Alcestis' mind she feels the power of fate grip her and growing gradually weaker she falls in a swoon upon her couch where she is found by Admetus, past all hope of recovery. In Euripides' version the actual death of Alcestis takes place so long after her devotion that her sacrifice has become widely known.

1. - Vv. 15 - 19 .

Heracles knows of it for he says:

"I know she pledged herself to die for thee." [1]

Admetus himself says:

"I know it, nowise unforeseen this ill
"Has swooped upon me: long I grieved to know it."[2]

The indefiniteness of the time when Alcestis is to be called on is of dramatic value for Euripides because it makes the acceptance of the sacrifice easier for Admetus. The effect on the husband and wife of the dim shadow of death in the distance is also noteworthy and valuable for a proper interpretation of the drama.

So far, then, Wieland's version (differing in every respect from Euripides) is that Alcestis has devoted herself to death unknown to Admetus. He finds her already in the clutches of fate and can only spend his breath in groans and vain lamentations. The scene between Admetus and Pheres, so cleverly introduced by Euripides to explain Admetus' state of mind after his wife's death, is entirely left out by Wieland, no doubt because he was influenced by "convictions begotten of the teaching of Christianity".

1. - V.524. 2. 420 - 1 .

Heracles now appears and instead of being deceived by Admetus and persuaded to enter the guest apartments and enjoy himself is frankly informed of the calamity immediately on his arrival. It is plain that by such a course a repetition of the "drinking scene " of the original is skillfully prevented, because Heracles has no excuse for not immediately proceeding to rescue the dead queen.

The Heracles of Wieland is quite inconsistent with the former portrait by Euripides. As soon as he enters it is noticed that he has "Tugend" written upon his forehead. "Für die ich alles wage", as he explains. He reminds us of nothing else than a Knight of the Round Table, a Sir Heracles with "Tugend" as the motto of his armorial bearings. He leaves the stage with the assertion that he will go to the underworld to rescue Alcestis or perish in the attempt.

Wieland has changed both the essential facts that Admetus solicited his substitute and the lapse of time between the devotion and the death of Alcestis. He has omitted the altercation scene and the drinking scene; he has introduced lines showing the need of the people of Pherae for their king as well as a new and insipid character in Parthenia, sister of the queen. Altogether he has shorn the play of all its interesting

features in order to make a justification of Admetus which is neither needed nor deserved.

Goethe has evidently felt the inadequacy of Wieland's treatment and has written an interesting satire on the Alceste entitled, "Götter, Helden und Wieland", in which Wieland is called down to hell in his sleep to answer to Admetus, Alcestis and Euripides for having written such a travesty as the play under discussion. When, in the course of the satire, an old pedant remarks that Wieland had only corrected the faults inherent in Euripides' time and point of view, Euripides cannot contain himself and bursts out with "Fehler, Schuld, Jahrhundert. O du hohes herrliches Gewölbe des unendlichen Himmels, was ist aus uns geworden". Evidently Goethe did not think that the Alcestis of Euripides was to be explained by saying that the Greek view was diametrically opposed to the modern.

The shade of Euripides is very scornful of the mock heroic sentimental Admetus of Wieland's play who agonizes at such length over his unfortunate inability to wrest the decrees of fate and die himself. Euripides says "Admet musz gern leben" and Admetus breaks in to corroborate the statement: a "Heldentot" he says he could have readily borne, a death in which

he could have left the world's stage in a blare of applause after having snatched his wife from the lion's jaws or some similar predicament. But the thought of a "Hausvatertot", the death of a nice family man, was too much for him. Goethe has put in the realistic fashion that was then characteristic of his thinking a very necessary fact, that, unless Admetus was loth to lose his life there could be no real tragedy. The discussion between Wieland and the shades becomes so heated that Heracles is awakened from a snooze brought on by a little overindulgence in the "Rosy" and he enters in a rather bad humor frightening poor Wieland with his huge size and abrupt address. Goethe's realism has led him to give an Aristophanic touch to the hero and we are reminded somewhat of his boisterous entry in the Frogs in response to Dionysus' vigorous knocking. Still, he comes far nearer to the Euripidean Heracles than Wieland's knight-errant. He is told of the "Tugend" for which he spends all his labor and his reply is -- "Virtue! I heard the word for the first time down here from a couple of simple-minded devils who couldn't give a decent account of it." Heracles gets so warm in his own defense that he finally wakens first Pluto and then Wieland himself where the satire naturally ends.

There is a debt of gratitude, however, owing

Wieland for pointing by his omissions and changes to the scenes and incidents that must be explained. Reading his version and that of Euripides side by side also shows that the things in which he differs from the Greek original, form the essence of Euripides' tragedy. Wieland substantiates the position of Mr. Way. He has written a drama based on modern sentiment and has left out the scenes which Mr. Way finds diametrically opposed to the modern point of view.

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How does Browning stand on this? In his poem "Balaustion's Adventure" he has written a translation of the Alcestis together with a running commentary to help out the meaning of the Greek which he regards as somewhat in need of support if one is to judge by the length of the explanatory matter. His general view has already been briefly given and the portions now to be discussed are those in which his interpretation is either notable or different from others. The most notable feature of the work is the glorification of Heracles. Balaustion sung her song on the steps of the temple of Heracles in Sicily. The personality of the god overshadows the whole of Browning's version just as his divinity did the recitation of his "fair coadjutor". Mr.

Verrall has made out his case very well in opposition to Browning's view and the following quotation[1] sums up the situation. The adjectives with which Balaustion adorns her hero are under discussion -- "It is pure Balaustion every word of it; the 'God' and the'half-God', the 'great voice', 'weary, happy face', 'happy, weary laugh', 'love of men', 'many grandnesses', 'arm which had slain the snake', 'lion's hide', 'interval twixt fight and fight again', 'snatched repose', 'dust o' the last encounter', 'breathing space for man's sake', 'solemn draught of true religious wine', 'grand benevolence', 'the god surmounting the man', 'Tree-like growth through pain to joy', and all the rest of it: everything put in which Euripides might have attached to the conception of Heracles but has in fact resolutely and consistently left out." One has only to read Balaustion's Adventure to pick out these phrases by the score, and by comparing the Greek he will find that they are Balaustion and not Euripides. In such passages as these her imagination has taken freer rein,

"Himself o'er the threshold sent his voice on first
"To herald all that human and divine
"I' the weary happy face of him -- half god
"Half man which made the god part seem the more."

1. - Euripides the Rationalist, Page 18.

"all the mightiness
"At labor in the limbs that for man's sake
"Labored and meant to labor their life long."

"For there stood the strength
"Happy as always, something grave perhaps
The great vein cordage on the fret-worked front
"Black swollen, beaded yet with battle dew
"The yellow hair of the hero! His big frame
"A-quiver with each muscle sinking back
"Into the sleepy smooth it leaped from late."

"Propped by the heart beats 'neath the lion's coat."

"The helpful breath returned and last the smile
"Shone out, all Heracles was back again."

But these passages do not appear in the Greek nor yet anything resembling them, and as distinguished from Euripides' treatment, the apotheosis of Heracles is apparent.

But in one matter which Mr. Verrall in his criticism of "Balaustion's Adventure" overlooks, Browning noticeably departs from both Wieland and Mr. Way, and it is in his conception of the character of Admetus.

He gives, up till the death of Alcestis, the picture of a selfish, irascible and undutiful king. But the actual death of his wife and the consciousness of his guilt which had been slowly growing and now breaks in upon him with its full strength, works a change in him and purges him of his littleness and makes a man of him. The evidence for this, according to Browning, appears in the resurrection scene. Heracles, as will be remembered, enters with the veiled woman, and tries to persuade Admetus to receive her into his house for a time. Admetus is very reluctant, and during the conversation says, in order to prove his fidelity to his dead wife,

"Death be my meed, if I betray her dead."[1]

Browning interprets the lines as follows:-

"And the thing he said was true:
"For out of Heracles a great glow broke,
"There stood a victor worthy of a prize,
"The violet crown that withers on the brow
"Of the half-hearted claimant. Oh! he knew
"The sign of the battle hard fought and well won
"This queller of the monsters -- knew his friend
"Planted firm foot now on the loathly thing
"That was Admetus late! Would die, he knew
"Ere let the reptile raise its crest again.

1. - V. 1096.

"If that was true, why try the true friend more?
"Then since thou canst be faithful to the death,
"'Take, deep into thy home, my dame!' Smiled he."

Browning interprets the scene to mean that Admetus has been tested and found to ring true: his life has changed and he is now a "victor worthy of a prize".

Will the scene bear that meaning? Scarcely. What is the test which Heracles has applied and which has proved Admetus true? It practically amounts to this, that Admetus refused to receive into his house the supposed slave girl as his concubine. It is no test! Even the basest man would respect his wife's memory on the day of her death, especially when he had promised her on her death bed only a few hours before, never to marry again,

"Nor ever in thy stead
"Shall bride Thessalian hail me as her lord." [1]

And agin in the courses of the same speech,

"And wrought by craftsman's cunning hands, thy form,
"Imaged upon a couch outstretched shall lie,
"Falling whereon, and clasping with mine hands
"Calling thy name, in fancy shall mine arms
"Hold my beloved, though I hold her not.
"A chill delight, I wot;" [2] (a characteristic touch).

1. - Vv. 330 - 1. 2. 348 ff.

Heracles' test must be rejected as inadequate, yet Browning's point is very significant. He felt that the Admetus of the earlier part of the play did not deserve to be the recipient of such a unique boon as the restoration of his wife from the dead. And this will be found to be the most severe crux of the play. How can the resurrection of Alcestis be justified as a dramatic ingredient of the plot? The discussion of this point is postponed for a little.

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Coming last to Mr. Verrall, we find that his interpretation is interesting and radical. His view of Heracles and part of what he says about Admetus can be readily accepted. But with the latter he has gone too far: Admetus is not all bad, and at least one point in the evidence given for his depravity is to be strongly deprecated. Mr. Verrall claims that Admetus buried his wife with abnormal and indecent haste. His words are:[1]

"To some such cause (i.e., the wrongly dominating influence of the theory of the unity of time) I should attribute the fact that, so far as I am aware, in none of our commentaries or studies of Alcestis is any note taken of an element in the story presented which, if the play were treated as liable to the ordinary judg-

1. - Euripides the Rationalist, Page 44.

ment of our senses, would certainly strike a reader at the first view as one of the most startling in the whole remarkable narrative. I refer to the haste and precipitancy, irregular and indecent in any case, and in this particular case nothing less than outrageous, with which the corpse of the noble heroine is conveyed to the grave."

This view is open to two objections: (1) Mr. Verrall's evidence is too slight. (2) The counter-evidence is so strong. Mr. Verrall rests his case for "unseemly haste", first, on the fact that the chorus were "the invited mourners and are alone apprised of the intention that the ceremony would proceed as soon as ever there is a body to bury". But that the funeral was not kept secret is proved by the entrance later of Pheres and a band of attendants bearing funeral gifts to the Queen. The second proof alleged is that Admetus was not popular and invited to the funeral only a few old men who were as ready to countenance the unseemly haste as he was. This point he bases on a doubtful interpretation of a plural in verse 210, Mr. Way's rendering is preferable and, at the same time, exonerates the chorus:

"For 'tis not all that love so well their kings
"As to stand by them, in afflictions loyal."

The third piece of evidence is based on a doubtful pun on the word (θυραῖος)[1] which is itself a disputed reading. It is the servant who is speaking of Alcestis to Heracles, with whom he is thoroughly annoyed, (it must be remembered that Heracles thinks that the dead woman is only a stranger[2]), and his words are ironical, "Oh, yes, an alien she,- O'er much an alien". Mr. Verrall would translate - "Oh, yes, it (the corpse)was out of the family and out of the door." The pun is a poor one. Besides, it was not in the servant's mind to criticize Admetus but Heracles, and further, the reading θυραῖος is rejected by Kirchhoff and Prinz-Wecklein for οἰκεῖος (the Oxford text reads θυραῖος).

The last witness, introduced by Mr. Verrall, is a verse of the chorus[3] - "Must I cut my hair and don the black vestment," which proves, as he says, that the chorus are not dressed in mourning for the funeral, and must cut a sorry figure as a funeral procession, adding thereby to the disgrace of Admetus. Now, the chorus are on the stage continuously up till the time that the procession starts for the grave, and they have had no opportunity to change to black. It would have been offensive and vulgar to have brought the chorus in at the beginning of the play, dressed in black while the Queen was still alive, as Mr. Verrall himself has noticed, and Euripides has without doubt taken the proper course. That is the

1.- V.811. 2.- V.533. 3. - V. 215.

sum and substance of his evidence.

The reasons why the funeral is not to be considered hasty and indecent, are these -

~~(1)~~ Nobody would notice the incongruity.

Mr. Verrall says that the audience would naturally be surprised and offended not to see the customary slave standing at the door of the palace after the Queen has died. That she is not there is proved by Heracles' innocent behaviour on his arrival. However, it is almost certain that the audience were not surprised. A modern parallel may be helpful.

Scene - A darkened room; on a bed a woman is dying; a doctor and her husband are sitting beside her; the man is weeping; through the door can be seen a hall in which there is a telephone; there are a few moments of silence, broken only by a man's sobbing; then the doctor rises and says, "It is all over"; after another pause the man rises heavily and goes out through the hall door to the telephone. He calls up the undertaker. Curtain.

The next is a street scene. The façade of the house in which the woman has just died, is seen. A man dressed in a black silk hat and gloves enters with a hammer in his hand. He skillfully tacks a rosette of crape to the front door and goes in. Several conversations take place in the street, which advance the plot of the drama.

That is impossible! We know that the preparation of the corpse for burial and other necessary details are the concomitants of every death, and that custom demands crape on the door of mourning. But, introduced on the stage, these things either give an impression of vulgar farce or else seem the excrescences of a morbid brain. It is absurd either to blame Euripides for having omitted some customary funeral details around the palace, or to base an interpretation of Admetus' motives on their absence.

The second reason why the funeral does not seem hasty is, - that Heracles is only paying a flying visit and death and resurrection must take place upon the same day.

In the third place, old Pheres enters when the funeral is just about to start. In his arraignment of his son he introduces every possible calumny that occurs to him. If the haste and indecency of the funeral were apparent at a glance to the Athenian audience, why not to Pheres whose wits would be sharpened by malice and prejudice? The concrete evidence of Admetus' crime was before his eyes; the chorus in their everyday clothes; the lack of conventional signs of death about the house; the abashed husband, caught in the act of giving his wife an unseasonable and revolting burial.

Why did the old man miss such a chance? The answer is, that the whole situation is only the creation of super-subtle criticism. It did not exist for Pheres, and it must not exist for us.

Mr. Verrall's most radical step is his interpretation of the resurrection, which he regards as no resurrection at all but a fortunate accident in which Heracles, going to rescue the Queen from death, found her in a comatose condition, revived her and brought her back to the husband who had so recently hurried her out of sight.

The grounds for this extraordinary view are, that the jaunty disposition shown by Heracles throughout, compels the audience to be mentally prepared for any denouement which is not serious, and which passes the traditional finale with a smile and a shrug; and further that the supposedly hurried burial might lead the audience to wonder if Alcestis were really dead or not. The most immediate indications of the deception he finds in Heracles' perfunctory remarks when he enters after the wrestle with death, namely a speech on Admetus' lack of hospitality and a casual reference to the struggle at the grave[1].

"I closed in conflict with the Lord of Spirits."

1. - Vv. 1140, 1142.

"From ambush by the tomb mind hands ensnared him."

Mr. Verrall's view excites objection at every point. Heracles, from the moment that he hears of Alcestis' death, becomes thoroughly serious and a fit instrument for a serious resurrection. To the complaint that Heracles, upon his entry with the woman, does not gasp and groan and carry the indications of a violent struggle, and burst into a song of triumph, the retort is brief and obvious. He did not wish Admetus to know at first that anything out of the ordinary had happened. He was merely entrusting him with a slave girl, picked up as a prize at some wayside games. Again, Euripides did not wish to make Heracles more prominent by giving him a long speech on the encounter with death because his chief interest is in Admetus and he must not be overshadowed. The impression that Heracles gives all through, and not less by his brief words about the conflict with death, is that he is a man of action, not of words. Admetus, with his useless weeping over his dying wife, and his ecstasy of self-commiseration after her death, does not stand well in comparison.

Mr. Verrall does not face the situation squarely. He does not try to give the resurrection scene a dramatic setting. It makes no difference to the main

thread of the plot whether Alcestis was really raised from the dead, or merely roused from a stupor. In either case, she was brought back, and it must be supposed that, had Heracles not roused her from her coma, she would have quietly died. His act is, for the purposes of the plot, as good as a resurrection. To the question whether the resurrection forms an appropriate and homogeneous climax to the rest of the play, Mr. Verrall has no answer except that found in the paragraph quoted below. After having proved to his own satisfaction that Admetus is a thoroughly selfish man from beginning to end, he leaves us with the glaring inconsistency that the climax of the play is the restoration to this bad man, of the wife whom he had basely betrayed and indecently buried. The word "restoration" is used advisedly because it will cover both a genuine resurrection, as we contend, and a sham one for which Mr. Verrall argues. Whichever thesis is the true one, the mere fact of restoration should be connected with the deserts of the man to whom Alcestis is given back. What excuse does Mr. Verrall offer for this novel method of criticizing a drama? It is this -

"The purpose of the Alcestis as a whole and that which alone connects into a whole its otherwise inharmonious and repugnant elements, is neither to solemnize

the legend, as would have been the purpose of Aeschylus, nor to embellish it, as might have been the purpose of Sophocles, but to criticize it, to expose it as fundamentally untrue and immoral, before an audience who were well acquainted with the general opinions of the author, well aware that from the circumstances of the case innuendo was the only way in which those opinions could be dramatically expressed, well accustomed to apprehend them in this form and predisposed by mental and moral temper, not merely to be content with such a mode of expression, but to regard it as the best possible conditions for intellectual art and intellectual pleasure."[1]

In Mr. Verrall's judgment the Alcestis is unified only by the consistent attitude of criticism adopted toward the traditional legend. Such a statement is a criticism of the dramatic reasonableness of the play, because a drama cannot be satisfactory which merely examplifies a theory, no matter how cleverly and consistently it be done, if it at the same time neglects consistency in its characters and presents inharmonious and incongruous incidents brought to an inharmonious and incongruous close. Mr. Verrall admits that there is no unity of the plot, for he does not try to explain why Alcestis is restored to her selfish husband,

1. - Euripides the Rationalist, pp. 77,78.

If Euripides is to be treated as a dramatist it must be primarily on a basis of plot and character and not on the ground of attitude or theory. Consistent theory or attitude is the business of philosophy and history. There is little value in commending a dramatist because of a theory which he presents and there is little value in trying to explain a piece of dramatic work by reference to the author's theories while denying any purpose or unity to its characters and plot.

Again, this theory which Euripides presents is expressed according to Mr. Verrall's idea by means of "innuendo". If he contends that the theory is the only consistent element in the play, then the only consistency in the Alcestis is to be found in its innuendo. In other words, Mr. Verrall maintains that the main course of the drama is full of illogical and inharmonious elements, and these inharmonious elements may be individually explained by an idea to be found in hints, asides, double meanings, and other forms of innuendo.

Mr. Verrall states that innuendo is the only dramatic medium for criticizing a legend. If Sophocles could embellish a legend dramatically and at the same time in straightforward and open fashion, there is absolutely no dramatic reason why a legend could not be criticized in the same open way. And if the Athenians

felt that innuendo was the best possible condition for intellectual art and intellectual pleasure, why did not Sophocles use or at any rate borrow from his rival this first-rate medium of dramatic presentation?

We cannot believe that Euripides made innuendo the main condition of his art in the Alcestis, nor can we believe that dramatic unity cannot be found in its obvious and open plot. Its scenes are not merely a medley of criticisms passed on an outworn theology which have no connecting link, except their consistently negative attitude. Mr. Verrall places Euripides in the first rank of the dramatists of the world in these words, "It should not be possible - - for an English poet, bound to the poets of Greece by mutual obligations, to pronounce Euripides no peer of his peers, a dramatist not to be ranked as the equal of those with whom he was actually ranked by the judgment of Athens and all the ancient world, without perceiving that he condemns not the subject of his criticisms, but his own comprehension."[1] And when we read on to find out in what Euripides' greatness consists, we are told innuendo, and a thoroughgoing criticism of religious dogma, that takes no account of dramatic unity. Innuendo never can be the mainspring of the drama. The clear thread of the plot, and the delineation of the principal characters, must be the centre of interest. The meaning of a play must not be hidden

1.- Euripides the Rationalist, P. 2.

in an obscure line which contradicts what seems to be the essential idea of the work. Antigone, Phaedra, Macbeth and Hedda Gabler, the imperishable creations of the stage, are not explained by foot-notes and the innuendo of obscure lines. Innuendo is not art, and in his best work, such as the Hippolytus and the Medea, Euripides was not guilty of this fault. Neither does he throw to the winds dramatic unity and the study of human character. It is clear that real dramatic poetry is to be expected from Euripides, and that position will be our standing ground now that the time has come to gather up some fragmentary points of constructive criticism.

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The first essential, in giving a constructive view of the Alcestis, is to come to a final conclusion about the truth and the value of the statement that the play is a satyric drama. By the truth of the statement is meant: is it an actual fact that the Alcestis was acted at the close of three other tragedies where the satyric drama always stood? By the value of the statement is meant: does the asserted fact that the Alcestis was acted in the place of a satyric drama form a valuable basis for estimating the play, and can the Alcestis and a satyric drama such as the Cyclops, be subjected to the

same canons of judgment?

There is little ground for doubt that the Alcestis occupied the fourth place following three other dramas of Euripides. For we find that the author[1] of the second argument (Codex Vaticanus) writes as follows -- Δεύτερος Εὐριπίδης, Κρήσσαις, Ἀλκμεώνι τῷ διὰ ψωφίδος, Τηλέφῳ, Ἀλκήστιδι, and the obvious conclusion is that the Alcestis occupied the position of a satyric drama. The phrase which occurs further on in the argument, - τὸ δὲ δρᾶμα ἐστι σατυρικώτερον ὅτι κ. τ. λ., on the surface seems to preclude the suggestion[2] that the author of the argument gave the order of the four plays carelessly, and that another of the four, possibly the Τηλέφος was the satyric drama. He evidently understood that the Alcestis was acted fourth, but it would be a nice question to decide what attitude of mind prompted him to use the comparative σατυρικώτερον instead of the positive σατυρικόν. The sense of the comparative may often be indicated by the word "rather" and if we translate the word σατυρικώτερον by "rather satyric", it at once suggests that the author of the argument was at some pains to justify the Alcestis as a satyric drama and felt that the point was arguable. While it must

1. - Aristophanes, according to Wüstemann.
2. - Made by G. Hermann, quoted here, from Long's Introduction to Cyclops, page 8.

therefore be admitted that externally the grounds are strong for calling the Alcestis satyric or pro-satyric, yet the evident hesitation of Aristophanes should make a dogmatic statement dangerous.

What value has this conclusion on the internal criticism of the play? This question is clearly the more important of the two because if it be found that the Alcestis has practically nothing in common with recognized satyric-drama and practically everything in common with tragedy, then the mere statement that the Alcestis was acted fourth has no vital value and the play may be legitimately judged by the canons of tragedy. Such at least are the contentions set forth in the remaining part of this thesis.

The Alcestis has practically nothing in common with satyric drama. To substantiate this statement let us consider side by side the Alcestis and the Cyclops, the only complete satyric-drama extant.

(1) As to length: the Alcestis contains 1163 lines while the Cyclops has only 709. The satyric burlesque to close the day's proceedings would naturally be short but the Alcestis is of full tragic length.[1]

1. - Prometheus Bound - 1093 vv. Children of Heracles 1055 vv.
Seven Against Thebes-1078 vv. Suppliants - 1234 vv.
Persians - 1076 vv. Rhesus - 996 vv.

(2) The two plays differ radically in their setting. In the Alcestis the action takes place before the palace of Admetus, a conventional tragic setting. In the Cyclops we are introduced to a scene of rocks, hills and pastures and the σκηνή becomes the Cyclops' cave.

(3) The choruses are widely dissimilar. In the Alcestis it is a band of Pheraean elders; in the Cyclops it consists of a troop of wild goat-men, the satyr-children of Silenus from whom the satyric drama takes its name, and who are one of its most distinctive features.

(4) The characters are very unlike. The Alcestis includes Admetus, Alcestis and Heracles, of whom Heracles, occupying the least important role of the three, is the only one whose character can be regarded as containing elements unusual in tragedy. The Cyclops has the godless cannibal Polyphemus, fabulous, misshapen and bloodthirsty; the cunning, degraded satyr, Silenus and the adventurer Odysseus.

(5) In the Alcestis, Heracles' speech[1] contains the only lines bordering on the comic. In the Cyclops comedy, burlesque and farce are found throughout. For example, we have the crazy σίκιννις which the satyr-

1. Alcestis - vv. 773 - 802.

chorus dances on its entry; or again the comic expressions of Silenus which remind us of Ξανθίας the slave in Aristophanes' "Frogs"; such as, ὦ κάλλιστον, ὦ κοκλώπιον, ὦ δεσποίνακε [1]. The contrast, too, between the comic utterance of Silenus[2] and the tragic style of Odysseus with phrases like, ὦ θεοῦ ποντίου γεννᾶτε πάτ [3] is absurd. Silenus keeps the audience amused all the time he is on the stage, dancing a jig at the taste of the precious liquor (v.156) and filching the wine(v.532).

(6) The plays are different in their general tenor. The Alcestis is noble and serious in tone, dealing with the sacrifice and restoration of Alcestis and the redemption of Admetus. The Cyclops is a boisterous pastoral in honor of Wine.

(7) There are differences in their diction and metre. W. E. Long in his preface to the Cyclops (p.9) gives a brief summary of the evidence, based, it seems, on the conclusions of G. Hermann, (Præef. to Cyclops). After quoting Hermann to the effect that satyric poetry allows the introduction of words which are the property of the "usus cotidianus" and of metres which are not to be bound by the strict rules of tragic verse, he gives as examples, σίκιννις σαλοῦσθαι, τυρὸς ὀπίας σκαρδαμυττειν, χρεμπτεσθαι and dimunitives

1. - Cyclops, vv. 266 & 267. 2. -Such as Cyclops vv.262-269, or 313 - 314.
3. - Cyclops, vv. 285 - 311.

such as κυκλώπιον and ἀνθρωπίσκος . He states that, in scansion, the rule of the crétic is not strictly observed (v.120), and that a free use of the anapaest is permitted and not confined to proper names, (vv. 154, 232, 234, 242, etc.).

The conclusion from this comparison is that, apart from the speech of Heracles already referred to, which is no greater innovation than the words of the comical messenger in Sophocles' Antigone, the Alcestis and the recognized satyric play have practically nothing in common.

The three scenes in the Alcestis which are cited to show that it is not a pure tragedy are the "Altercation Scene", the "Drinking Scene" and the "Resurrection Scene". The first is in no way incompatible with tragedy. In fact, it is one of the most necessary passages for an understanding of Admetus' character, and not a ridiculous squabble introduced to pander to the argumentative tastes of the audience. Again, the actual carousal of Heracles does not take place upon the stage, and his speech to the servant is the only one bordering on the comic that he makes. With regard to the propriety of its introduction into tragedy, we have only to appeal to the Grave-digger's scene in Hamlet, or to the more striking Porter's Scene in Macbeth, together with

De Quincy's explanation of it. The Resurrection Scene is harder. It must be remembered that Euripides and not Aristophanes was the founder of the New Comedy, which in ~~time~~ turn inspired the work of Plautus and Terence. And his relationship to them can be well discerned in the Alcestis. But Aristotle allows to tragedy "reversal of fortune", of which the Resurrection Scene is an example. So that it is not right to be too dogmatic. A tragedy foreshadowing the New Comedy, and concluding with a scene which now-a-days is the property of comedy, but which Aristotle assigns to tragedy, is a fairly adequate definition. It should be noted that comedy in the Fifth Century was a mixture of political satire, farce, burlesque, comic opera, newspaper editorial and literary criticism, and that if a Greek poet wished to produce a play like the "Winter's Tale", he had to produce it as a tragedy. Since the Alcestis is a Greek Play, it is perfectly justifiable to follow Aristotle and call it a tragedy.

"Every tragedy," says Aristotle, "falls into two parts - Complication and Unravelling or Denouement. By the Complication, I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action and the part which marks the turning point to good or bad fortune. The Unravelling is that which comes between the beginning of the change and the end. Thus in the Lynceus of Theodectes the Complication consists of the incidents presupposed in the drama."[1]

1.- Aristotle Poetics, Ch.XVIII (Butcher's Trans.)

The Alcestis yields itself to a very obvious division - the Complication up till the moment that Heracles intervenes and resolves to save the lately buried Queen, (v.837) and the Unravelling from then till the end. In the Complication, the situation of the principal characters grows more troubled, culminating with the death of Alcestis (v.392) and the misery of the bereaved husband. In the Unravelling, through the medium of Heracles everything is brought to a happy and normal termination; the dutiful wife is brought back to a continuance of the life which she had so well used, and the penitent husband receives her back again. And so on the construction might be elaborately analyzed until the surprising result is obtained that the Alcestis is nothing but a comedy: a Greek version of "The Winter's Tale" with Admetus, Alcestis and Heracles taking the parts that Shakespeare has given to Leontes, Hermione and Paulina. Mr. Way suggests a title that would express better the real nature of the superficial play. He calls it "The Reward of Virtue".[1]

But there must be some anomaly, and Decharme must have had some reason to call the Alcestis mainly tragic, although the surface division of the drama makes it a comedy. The last sentence in the quotation from the Poetics holds the key to the difficulty - "The com-

1. - Appendix "A" , Euripides in English Verse.

plication consists of the incidents presupposed in the drama". That is to say, we must look back into the past history of the figures on the stage in order to understand the position in which they find themselves. The Alcestis makes necessary a further step, because not only the complication, but part of the unravelling is presupposed in the actual production. And if the incidents in this background of presupposed material are rightly linked to each other and to the play itself, the true and underlying tragedy of Admetus and Alcestis will be seen.

The episode which Euripides has presented to us is part of a wider series of events from which it draws its real significance. These events go back to a time before Admetus had taken the irrevocable step and accepted his wife as his substitute when he reigned as King of Pherae and was the kind master of the humble Apollo. The tragic history of Admetus then, will run something like this - King Admetus reigns in Pherae, a wise and beneficent ruler,[1] a man with a reputation for hospitality,[2] and above all, kind to those who serve him. Everything points to a happy and prosperous reign, and the King feels the joy of living, the joy of ruling and the joy of doing good. The only deficiency in his well rounded life is the lack of a wife to share his throne and be his daily

1.- V. 596. 2. - Vv. 566-7, 830
568-9, 857-8-9.

companion. Accordingly, he marries Alcestis, a fair Princess of the neighboring town of Iolcus, and now his cup of bliss seems brimming. But like a sudden storm in a cloudless sky, misfortune swoops upon him. He has offended the Fates[1] and death is to be the penalty. To him in his extremity comes Apollo with a plan devised to prolong his life if one of his family will consent to die in his stead.[2] Here indeed, lies the crucial moment for the King. How Shakespeare or Schiller would have delighted to portray his inward struggle during these days, the one with swift and subtle strokes, the other concentrating all his powers of psychological interpretation upon the task! How one moment he would resolve to play the man and suffer to the death, and the next yielding to the alluring suggestion to prolong his life, doubly alluring coming upon him at the most trying moment when his joy of life was most intense and broad vistas, leading into the future, were open for him to walk, dressed in the royal robes. And here ends the real tragic complication: for Admetus asked his father, then his mother, then his friends, and lastly his wife, to be his substitute; and the last alone took up the burden. Here is the turning point of the real tragedy, which gives the dark background to our theme. Alcestis' life is clear and unconfused : she is a Desde-

1.- Cf. Prologue lines 11 and 12.
2.- Alcestis Prologue vv. 11 - 14.

mona in her passivity, a Cordelia in her resolution, and an Imogene in her affection. But what of the King, now that he has won a few paltry years? Life and power are tasteless to him; the food that nurtures the material body which stole from him his honor, sticks in his throat, and hours of agony and remorse far worse than death are the companions of his daily life. So at least Euripides felt the essence of the story of Admetus and Alcestis, and he has drawn aside the veil for a moment from before the lives of these two people and allowed us to see them in the grip of the fate which they had woven for themselves, passing to the sad conclusion of their unhappy lives. Are we to call Alcestis unhappy? Perhaps not. No words of regret pass her lips, yet even her strong spirit broke just before the last when she threw herself in sorrow upon the bed that had received her as a bride, and made her last silent pilgrimage about the house to deck the family images and bid them farewell. The lines which express her suffering are the most tender and beautiful in the play, -

"For when she knew that the appointed day
"Was come, in river water her white skin
"She bathed, and from the cedar chests took forth

"Vesture and jewels, and decked her gloriously,
"And stood before the hearth and prayed and said:
"'Queen, for I pass beneath the earth, I fall
"'Before thee now, and nevermore, and pray -
"'Be mother to my orphans: mate with him
"'A loving wife, with her a noble husband.
"'Nor, as their mother dieth so may they,
"'My children, die untimely, but with weal
"'In the homeland fill up a life of bliss.'
"To all the altars through Admetus' halls
"She went, with wreaths she hung them, and she prayed
"Plucking the while the tresses of the myrtle,
"Tearless, unsighing, and the imminent fate
"Changed not the lovely rose tint of her cheek.
"Then to her bower she rushed, fell on the bed;
"And there, O, there she wept, and thus she speaks:
"'Oh couch, whereon I loosed the maiden zone
"'For this man, for whose sake I die today,
"'Farewell; I hate thee not. Me hast thou lost,
"'Me only: loath to fail thee and my Lord
"'I die: but thee another bride shall own,
"'Not more true hearted; happier perchance.'
"Then falls thereon, and kisses: all the bed
"Is watered with the flood of melting eyes,

"But having wept her fill of many tears,
"Drooping she goeth, reeling from the couch;
"Yet oft as forth the bower she passed returned
"And flung herself again upon the couch."[1]

The maid who speaks these lines is inspired by her subject, and rises out of herself, giving the finest picture that we possess of the womanly Alcestis. Her words, spoken to Admetus, in the exhaustion following her trance-like burst of lyric song and preceding her death, are quiet and definite, with the air of a last will and testament about them. They do not let us look behind the barrier of dutiful resignation which she has studied to be the tone and manner of her death.

It is now proper to ask whether the character of Admetus bears out the hypothesis advanced.

The Alcestis is like the last play of a trilogy, which might consist of "Admetus, the King"-"Admetus' Choice"and the"Alcestis," and we should expect to find a man who has greatly sinned, yet is conscious of his fault and repents it sorely. Aristotle gives a similar idea of a tragic hero in these words - "There remains, then, the character between these two extremes, that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about, not by vice or depravity,

1. - Lines 158 - 186.

but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous."[1] Briefly, the tragic hero must be a great man with a great fault.

Possibly the attitude of the critics may be explained in this way, that they have taken only one side of the character and laid undue emphasis on that; for example, Mr. Way has made him"a noble hero in every respect", while Mr. Verrall has almost exhausted the vocabulary of abuse in describing him. The writer takes Aristotle for his guide - "there remains then the character between these two."

On what grounds does the interpretation of Admetus' character as a"great man with a great fault", rest? As a great man he has certain positive virtues. He has treated his slaves well and kindly, he has a reputation for hospitality, and perhaps above all he has the power to see his own faults and repent them. His faults may be summed up in the word "selfishness". Three main points will be adduced to substantiate and illustrate this interpretation - (1) Admetus has suffered and is suffering for his cowardly and selfish action. (2) The altercation scene (one of the most powerful in the play) which throws a strong light on the troubled condition of his mind. (3) The soliloquy[2]

1. - Poetics Ch. XIII (Butcher's Trans.)
2. - Vv. 935 - 961.

which begins -

"Friends, I account the fortune of my wife
"Happier than mine, albeit it seems not so."

and continues:

"But I, unmeet to live my doom outrun
"Shall drag out bitter days."

Concluding:

"And if a foe I have, thus shall he scoff,
"'Lo there who basely liveth - dared not die,
"'But whom he wedded gave a coward's ransom,
"'And 'scaped from Hades. Count ye him a man?
"'He hates his parents, though himself was loath
"'To die!' Such ill report, besides my griefs
"Shall mine be. Ah, what profit is to live,
"Oh friends, in evil fame, in evil plight?

These lines, just quoted, clearly show the conscious self-criticism and repentance of Admetus.

Admetus' suffering is found expressed in these lines, first of the handmaid -

"Such are the ills Admetus' home within.
"Now had he died, he had ended; but in 'scaping
"He bears a pain that he shall ne'er forget."[1]

1.- Vv. 196-8.

The chorus say -

"For such things on his sword might a man not fall,
"Or knit up his throat in the noose,
"'Twixt the heaven and the earth that quivereth?" [1]

Admetus himself -

"Ah me! For thy word rusheth bitterness o'er me,
"Bitterness passing the anguish of death."[2]

And again he speaks -

"I know it: nowise unforeseen this ill
"Hath swooped upon me: long I grieved to know it."[3]

Heracles says -

"I felt it when I saw his tear-drowned eyes."[4]

Many other lines express his immediate grief; indeed, in nearly every speech that Admetus utters, his suffering is predominant.

The Altercation Scene has received much adverse criticism. It has been explained as a sop thrown to a litigious audience; as an indication of Admetus' utter depravity; as a blot on the play, and nowhere

1. - Vv. 227-30.
2. Vv. 274-5.
3. - Vv. 420-1.
4. V. 826.

has its psychological value been rightly estimated. Admetus, torn with the most intense feelings of despair, utter abandon and self-torture, is in the very act of carrying to the grave the corpse of Alcestis. His thoughts must have been centred on the innocence of the victim and on the guilt of those who had basely accepted her sacrifice -- guilty son! guilty parents! While he is in this frame of mind, Pheres enters, and his first words are calculated to fan the flame of his son's indignation, for they are pious, smug and insincere, covering as they do, the blackness of heart which betrayed itself in the vicious tirade during the progress of the scene. This is the way Pheres speaks, upon his entry -

"I come in thine afflictions, sorrowing, son:
"A noble wife and virtuous hast thou lost,
"None will gainsay: yet these calamities
"We needs must bear, how hard to bear soever."

* * * * * *

"O saviour of my son, who us upraisedst
"In act to fall, all hail! May bliss be thine
"Even in Hades. Thus to wed, I say,
"Profiteth men - or nothing worth is marriage."[1]

1. - Vv. 614 - 628.

It takes but a little thing to let loose the flood gates of Admetus' passion, which has been boiling within his breast, begotten of self-revilement, bitter loss, and resentment at his father's meanness. He speaks words that no man so guilty himself, should hurl at another, though not less guilty; words that no son should address to his father, in any case. These words are so fierce that they make us for the moment lose all sympathy with him. They culminate with the following lines -

"Avaunt with her that kenneleth with thee!
"Childless grow old, as ye deserve; while lives
"Your child! ye shall not come beneath one roof
"With me. If need were to renounce by heralds
"Thy fatherhood, I had renounced it now."[1]

And yet the very extravagance of Admetus' language is an indication that by heaping abuse and blame upon his father's head, he is trying to stifle the small and insistent voice within himself, which keeps whispering - Selfish coward! But in the end the small voice conquers, and Admetus shows us in the soliloquy ("Friends, I account the fortune of my wife") in which he rises to his greatest height, how full is his consciousness of fault and bitter self-abnegation.

1. - Vv. 734 - 38.

This should seem convincing evidence of Admetus' real character - a man who has greatly sinned, but has nobly acknowledged his sin. Euripides has drawn a consummate picture, suggesting by artistic touches - the abuse of his father, and the selfish aspect which his grief takes in the earlier stages of the play - the original fault which brought about the tragedy, and yet giving in the main the idea of a penitent sufferer.

Euripides must be criticized for the way he has handled the resurrection. It is not effective, nor is, in this scene, the psychology of Admetus' character convincing. It is possible to justify the introduction of the scene as a whole, by comparing it with the judgment and acquittal of Orestes, or the last scene of Oedipus at Colonus, But when the interior of the scene is examined, it will be found hurried and lacking in a feeling of lofty climax. The resurrection should be the culminating point, and it does not appeal to us as either impressive or emotional. The test of Admetus' love by forcing him to accept the slave girl, is inadequate; the reunion between Admetus and Alcestis is short and labored; the attitude of Heracles is business-like. As a whole, the scene is disappointing. But as a

scene, it is properly part of the drama - Admetus has expiated his fault and Alcestis' life must not be allowed to go out like a candle and never be relit. The episode introduces another interesting question, which cannot be followed up here - how far is the resurrection a criticism of the inexorableness of fate? Its decrees are shattered by the intervention of the material Heracles. But this short article does not attempt a consideration of Euripides' ideas on religion. The writer will be satisfied if he has thrown a little light on some controversial points and exonerated Euripides from the charge of ignoring real dramatic principles.

Finis.

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